# Abaye

**(c. 280 - 337)**

## BRIEFING

Abaye (or Abbaye) (Jewish Babylonian Aramaic: אַבַּיֵי, romanized: abbayē) was an amora of the fourth generation of the Talmudic academies in Babylonia. He was born about the close of the third century and died in 337.

## BIOGRAPHY

Abaye, according to Talmudic tradition, was the head of the Pumbedita Academy until the day of his death. He was known as a modest and honest man, supporting himself through farming. He lived most of his life in poverty. Abaye was born as the only son of Kilil. His father died before Abaye was born, and his mother died during childbirth; he was adopted by his uncle, Rabbah bar Nahmani.

### His name

Abaye was often called "Nahmani" by his friends. According to one opinion, first mentioned by Rashi, he was called Nahmani because he was raised by Rabbah bar Nahmani, but according to another opinion, his original name was actually Nahmani. To avoid confusion with the name of his adoptive father, he was given the nickname "Abaye," which is an acronym of the verse: "Asher-Bkha Yerukham Yatom" (Hosea 14:4)—as explained by the Maharsha in the Talmudic tractate Kiddushin in the name of the "Sefer Yuchasin" and by the Ari in Shaar HaGilgulim.

In contrast, some suggest that he was called Abaye because the name resembles the word "Abba" (father), implying "his name is like his father's name." Another modern theory suggests that 'Abaye' is an ancient Aramaic word meaning 'comfort.' Thus, the name Abaye is actually the Syrian version of the name Nahmani.

The Talmud mentions that even in Heaven he was called "Nahmani." It is stated that he once encountered Agrat bat Mahlat (a demon) who met him on the street and said to him: If it were not proclaimed in Heaven, "Beware of Nahmani and his Torah," you would be in danger. Abaye responded: If I am significant in Heaven, I decree that you shall never pass through a populated area again.

### His childhood and teachers

His main teachers were Rabbah bar Nahmani, his uncle who raised him, and Rav Yosef, one of the great Amoraim of the previous generation. Abaye was with them all their lives.

It is said that when Rav Yosef fell ill and forgot his learning, Abaye would remind him. Abaye greatly respected his teachers, to the extent that it was said about him that when he saw the "ear of Rav Yosef's donkey approaching," he would rise in his honor.

Abaye was particularly concerned with maintaining a connection with the sages of Eretz Yisrael and studying their teachings, thus integrating the rulings of Rabbi Yochanan into the Babylonian Talmud. Even in his youth, his talents were evident, as recorded in Bavli, Berakhot 48a:

> *"Abaye and Rava were sitting before Rabbah. Rabbah asked them: To whom do we bless? They replied: To the Merciful (God). And where does the Merciful reside? Rava pointed to the ceiling; Abaye went outside and pointed to the sky. Rabbah said to them: Both of you will become sages—as people say: 'Every gourd, when it begins to grow, one can already tell what will come of it.'"*

As Abaye grew, he became known as a peacemaker and was involved in acts of kindness, earning the people's trust and respect.

Abaye greatly appreciated his stepmother, and he often quoted her, adding the phrase "My mother told me."

### His friends

He was known for his disputes with Rava. However, there were also instances where Abaye supported Rava's opinion or explained it, and in about thirty places, the Gemara states:

> *"Abaye and Rava both said…"*

Except for six cases, the law always follows Rava in their disputes (see Yael Kgam). More than four thousand sayings, questions, contradictions, and answers are attributed to them, and almost no topic in the Talmud was left unexplored by them. The phrase "The Discussions of Abaye and Rava" became synonymous with the entire Talmud.

Among his friends was Rav Shimi bar Ashi. He was close to Abaye and transmitted some of his teachings that were not stated in the study hall but explained to his sons during their lessons. However, he was not considered a disciple of either Abaye or Rava, as he often debated with them on matters of law, and occasionally disagreed with them.

**As the Head of the Academy**

Besides Rava, Abaye was also a friend of Rabbi Zeira, one of the great sages of the generation who, according to Talmudic tradition, chose Abaye as the head of the academy after the death of Rav Yosef. According to this tradition, four students competed for the position of Rosh Yeshiva, and it was decided that the one who would present an unrefutable argument would be chosen. It was Abaye who prevailed, surpassing even Rava. It is also said that while Rava received a heavenly voice only on the eve of Yom Kippur, Abaye received it every Friday, and Abba Ummana received it every day.

Abaye led the academy and the entire Babylonian Jewry for 14 years.

Abaye (as well as his uncle Rabbah) were descendants of Eli HaKohen, upon whom it was decreed that they would die young. Abaye lived about sixty years.

He also served as a judge, and the Talmud recounts how he identified document forgers based on their writing style.

**Bar Hedya and the dreams of Abaye and Rava**

During the time of Abaye and Rava, there was a man named Bar Hedya who worked as a dream interpreter. It is said that he would interpret dreams favorably for those who paid him and unfavorably for those who did not. Abaye would pay him, and Rava would not, leading Bar Hedya to interpret Abaye's dreams favorably and Rava's dreams unfavorably. The Talmud in Berakhot recounts a series of such dreams.

For example: Abaye and Rava said to him: We saw in our dream the verse "Your ox shall be slain before your eyes, and you shall not eat thereof." Bar Hedya interpreted it for Rava as a loss in business, causing such sorrow that he would not eat, and for Abaye as a gain in business, making him so joyful he could not eat.

## FAMILY

His first wife bore him sons and daughters, but no further details about her are known.

His second wife was Homa, the great-granddaughter of Rav Yehuda, whose two previous husbands had died. In the dispute among the sages about whether a woman is considered hazaka after the death of two husbands or only after three, Abaye relied on Rav Yitzchak bar Yosef, who ruled that the hazaka is only after three occurrences, and he married Homa. He too later died.

One of Abaye's sons was the well-known Amora Rav Bibi bar Abaye.

## BURIAL PLACE

Regarding his burial place, Rabbi Chaim Vital wrote in Sefer HaGilgulim:

> *"In the village of Yavnit there is a cave where Abaye and Rava are buried. The entrance faces west, and inside there are many chambers. In the southern-eastern corner is the chamber where Abaye is buried. The adjacent chamber to the south is where Rav Dimi of Nehardea is buried. The next chamber to the south, which is wider than Rav Dimi's chamber, is where Rava is buried. It is the middle chamber on the southern side; the other chambers were not identified."*

## TEACHINGS

There is a law that if a utensil is ingested within a living person or animal, even if the person or animal is inside an Ohel, the impure object does not become impure through the impurity of the enclosure. The Amora Rabbi Zeira raised a question about whether a utensil inside a convulsing animal is considered ingested because the animal is not dead. Rav Sheshet ruled that the animal is not considered ingested since it is considered "food," but Rabbi Zeira questioned this, asking how it could be considered "dead," given

the law stating that such an animal does not transmit carcass impurity. Rashi explains that the question is only relevant for a Jew who has utensils inside an impure animal or a gentile who has utensils inside a pure animal. However, if a Jew has utensils inside a pure animal permitted for consumption, it is clear that the utensils are not considered ingested because the animal is allowed for consumption, and something ingested within food is not considered ingested. The question only pertains to an impure animal, which is forbidden for consumption, and whether it should be viewed as alive since it does not transmit carcass impurity or as food since it transmits food impurity. Abaye ruled stringently, considering both statuses—life and death—therefore, the animal does not protect what is inside it, but one who commits bestiality with it incurs capital punishment if done intentionally and with knowledge, and a Sin Offering if done unintentionally, as it is still considered alive.

## MODERN APPLICATION

Abaye's dicta continue to inform contemporary practice. His remark that "the world endures only for the breath of school-children" (Shabbat 119b) is widely quoted by educators as the classic Talmudic basis for prioritising early Torah study; the Lubavitcher Rebbe invoked the same passage in advocating universal Jewish day-schools. Abaye's practice of serving a meal whenever someone completed a tractate (Shabbat 118b) underpins the present-day Siyum ceremony that halakhic sources classify as a Seudat mitzvah; the Rebbe recommended public siyumim even during the Nine Days to introduce "constructive joy" into that mournful period. Finally, Abaye's observation in Moed Katan 28a that surviving to age 60 removes the penalty of Kareth is the textual source for celebrating a sixtieth birthday with thanksgiving, a milestone the Rebbe framed as a call for renewed public service rather than retirement.